

THE (SELF-)PROLIFERATION OF RUSSIAN FASCISTS

IAN GARNER, *Z GENERATION: INTO THE HEART OF RUSSIA'S FASCIST YOUTH*

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An excellent book, *Z Generation: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth*, which the *Financial Times* describes as a “chilling investigation,” offers a portrait of contemporary Russian youth. Dr Ian Garner has conducted an in-depth sociological study from which a strong thesis emerges: fascism in Russia is increasingly thriving.

The everyday image of Russia in the Polish media, as well as in more serious commentaries, is deceptively one-sided and monotone. Whether in connection with elections, such as the last presidential one, or new poll data, we are persuaded that Russian society is passive and behaves in accordance with the Kremlin's dictates, mainly out of fear of repression. We read with disbelief and horror about soldiers who perish wholesale, although not before the worst of them have committed criminal acts against civilians – torturing, raping, and looting as in 1945.

Not only in Poland, but probably in many other countries, a persuasion about the civilisational inferiority of contemporary Russia is becoming stronger. This allows “people of the West” to believe that even if Ukraine

is losing an unequal fight, truth is on our side, and therefore justice will sooner or later triumph. Or some other positive scenario will emerge, although it is unclear when and under what conditions.

Garner is not interested in some indeterminate entity, in “the whole of Russian society,” about which we know as much as we can glean from unrevealing percentage bars. He writes neither about soldiers nor generals, nor about veterans of the Homeland War, nor about IT specialists who have chosen emigration, nor about the middle class who spend their holidays in Thailand or Turkey. He focuses on the Russian youth who spend hours on social media, waiting for Taylor Swift’s new album and watching the same series as their peers in every corner of the world. Except that these Russian teenagers are budding fascists, who believe what Solovyov says:

We’re the greatest country because we have the greatest destiny!
We’re standing firm and protecting the children the UkroNazis
are killing with our bodies! We’re fighting on the side of good.
Your brothers and fathers are at the frontline. The aim of human
life is not to go on living happily [...] to buy a car or an apartment.
You can only live when you know what you’re prepared to die for.
(Garner 2023a: 123)

Garner documents the thesis that Russian Generation Z identifies with the “Z” painted on the tanks that are about to crush Ukraine. This is a shocking account, based on interviews and a review of the content of central propaganda messages and social media. The argument is supported by a historical analysis of Putin’s times and consists of seven chapters: 1. “God Is with Our Boys”; 2. “A Fairy-Tale Rebirth”; 3. “The Enemy Within”; 4. “Remaking the Young”; 5. “Fascism Unleashed”; 6. “The Unmeaning of Protest”; 7. “The Z Generation.”

Marcin Kowalczyk’s Polish translation reflects Garner’s style well, and its clear, literary language does not detract from the scholarly nature of the monograph, which deserves a place on the shelf next to recognised works such as Timothy Snyder’s *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*.

Garner’s interest in Russian war culture has already resulted in an earlier work, *Stalingrad Lives: Stories of Combat and Survival*. It is worth adding that the book reviewed here has been translated into five languages to date. Its author studied, among other places, in Saint Petersburg, and received his PhD from the University of Toronto. Recently, he has been working at

the Center for Totalitarian Studies at the Pilecki Institute in Warsaw¹ and has been taking an active part in important debates. On the website of the Pilecki Institute, a video report can be found of a meeting in March 2023, prior to Hurst & Company's publication in London of this extremely interesting book, which the translator has given a very well-chosen title: *Za Putina. Mroczny portret faszystowskich ruchów młodzieżowych w Rosji (Pro-Putin: A Dark Portrait of Fascist Youth Movements in Russia)*.

One of the debates in which Garner participated at the Pilecki Institute concerned "Hitler and Putin on TikTok: Totalitarian Propaganda and Modern Media." I did not take part but I would like to speak after the fact to draw attention to three issues that I consider crucial, that is, creeping fascism, widespread viral propaganda, and the collective identity of young Russians.

Snyder calls Putin a schizofascist and writes about Russia that "real fascists call their opponents fascists, blame Jews for the Holocaust and treat World War II as an argument for the continued use of violence" (Snyder 2019: 190). The schizoid dimension of fascism can be said to be completely resistant to truth and logical contradictions, of which there is no shortage of evidence: "Schizofascism was one of many contradictions visible in 2014. According to Russian propaganda, Ukrainian society was full of nationalists but not a nation; the Ukrainian state was repressive but did not exist; and Russians were forced to speak Ukrainian though there was no such language" (Snyder 2019: 191).

There is no need to convince anyone about the growing danger of creeping fascism. It has favourable conditions for growth, and the Kremlin is becoming an international centre – not any longer of communism, but of fascism. There is no shortage of well-known and completely new generators of fascist movements, which some prefer to call "neo-fascism." Concerns about future employment are growing as labour markets are hit by the pandemic or technological revolutions. There are ongoing wars whose ends are receding, as in the case of Ukraine or the Gaza Strip. There is talk of other threats, such as in connection with Taiwan. There is the increasing, previously unknown problem of climate refugees, whose scale we are unable to predict, any more than we can predict the rate of global warming in the next decades. When it comes to the scale of migration processes, sta-

¹ The Pilecki Institute was established by the Polish Parliament on 9 November 2017. The institute's mission involves the significance of Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century and their political and social impact on a global scale.

tistics and forecasts are pessimistic. The influx of migrants from the poor South is unstoppable, and so far, there are no effective policies to prevent it. Let us add to this the activities of the mass media, even the mainstream ones, which shape public opinion in the spirit of xenophobia. As if that were not enough, Russia has “enriched” the concept of hybrid war to include the use of migrants for targeted attacks on the borders of European Union countries.

Ian Garner does not deal directly with these global phenomena, but he is very aware that the spectre of fascism is not imaginary. If Russian youth is its breeding ground, we cannot rule out that there will be groups of teenagers outside Russia who will pick up some version of fascism that will be “pop cultural,” and thus the book *Z Generation* talks about pop-cultural schizofacism.

How did it happen that young Russian Internet users became willing to “go under fire for Putin?” Garner shows the phenomenon from two perspectives. On the one hand, the individual, biographical side. On the other, as a mass phenomenon that is best described by the metaphor of the radicalism virus. One of the characters Garner describes is Vladislav. “He is everything a Russian liberal ought to be”: a hipster who is the life of the party and knows Europe, where he has many friends, and who speaks English well. A media person, a videographer for a state media producer, he seems to fit the profile of a Navalny supporter who would take part in protests. The reality is completely different.

In the week that Russian forces invaded Crimea, Vlad’s VK page was transformed overnight. The young Vlad, then barely twenty, suddenly started posting a slew of nationalist imagery: a cartoon of a hulk-like, muscled Russian bear bursting free of his clothes; an image of Putin holding a gun to Barrack Obama’s head; and a cartoon of a Russian bear defending a helpless “Ukrainian” bear cub against a monstrous American hyena brandishing a “democracy” sign. (Garner 2023a: 88)

There are many like him.

In turn, for the youngest, those from primary school, there is the Youth Army (Junarmia), whose offerings are not confined to training camps and exercises with dummy knives, rifles, and uniforms, which look great in selfies. Junarmia gives these children something much larger: a common

pictorial and emotional language of collective identity – “Russia is my life. I can breathe here. Russia means home. Family. Love. Peace.” One of the young soldiers writes in TikTok style, “I’m here to save people” (Garner 2023a: 184). Garner sees the key problem of regained group identity, the chance to blend into a group, and extreme nationalist ideology. “Surrounded by models of fascist excellence, however, the young can fill up their emptied identities with the state’s ideology of war” (Garner 2023a: 197).

Putin’s war mythology of the Russian “struggle for peace” recreates itself spontaneously and lives thanks to young Internet creators who are free-of-charge Stakhanovites. They creatively develop propaganda that is the pellet feed of a central and monolithic message. Young, talented Internet creators take the place of ideologists and propagandists. They are creating, remixing, and uploading at every hour of the day and night. They are massively producing, for free, successive activist songs, poems, posts, memes, and videos whose meaning is clearly criminal: “Fuck those Ukro-nazi scum.”

Through interviews and media analysis, Ian Garner has gathered comprehensive documentation to illustrate the phenomenon of fascism planned from above, which multiplies on its own, wrenching Russian youth from a sense of isolation, emptiness, and hopelessness. Is there a risk that various forms of extremism, leaning towards fascism, will increase epidemically in other parts of the world? I’m afraid so, but the book’s greatest value is in tracking fascist youth movements in Russia. And also in that it does not allow us to remain indifferent and forces us to look for ways out. We read about one of them in connection with Dr Bruce White’s team from the Organization for Identity and Cultural Development, who have developed a data-driven approach, as know-how for building counter-narratives, under the slogan “Russians don’t need to stop being ‘Russian’ to be deradicalised.” Will White’s approach provide an effective way for young people – other than just Russian youth – to reject extremism? We don’t know, although I personally do not have such faith, because I think that radicalism, which does not shy away from violence, fits perfectly in network structures. It is breeding in many places, with or without the Kremlin’s help. “The aggression of radicalising groups hits not only their opponents but also completely incidental victims. The spectre of retaliation penetrates the daily lives of groups and individuals, accelerating radicalisation, which fuels political parties competing for every vote and those revolutionary social movements that dream of a better world right away” (Kuczyński 2023: 8).

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